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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 4815
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3456
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0515
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 3548
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2626
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7321
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5058
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1725
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000115

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: MUSLIM PARTY LEADER ACCUSES GOVERNMENT
OF USING STRONG-ARM TACTICS

REF: COLOMBO 102 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader Rauff Hakim complained to Ambassador on January 19 that the President's brother and senior political advisor Basil Rajapaksa had employed strong-arm tactics to induce members of his party to join the government. Hakim said, however, that he was standing by the conditions he had placed on the SLMC taking ministerial portfolios. He agreed that the MoU between the governing SLFP and the opposition UNP was crucial to developing a devolution proposal that could reinvigorate the peace process. However, he observed that the government side showed little interest in talking about peace negotiations at present. Instead, the President and his men seemed intent on consolidating their power, using means that Hakim found "ugly and unpleasant." Hakim indicated that the Rajapaksas had met some resistance to their strategy and thought the timetable for announcing crossovers had slipped until about January 29. He hoped that the UNP factions would find a way to reunite, but feared that the would-be crossovers had "burned their boats." End summary.

12. (C) In a meeting Ambassador had requested to discuss the internal political situation, Hakim confirmed reports we had from other sources that Basil Rajapaksa had resorted to strong-arm tactics in attempting to recruit crossovers to bolster the government ranks. Hakim said that while he found all the maneuvering going on "amusing," one of his MPs had experienced "harrowing intimidation" at the hands of Basil. The SLMC had asked the government side to address some of their concerns - including sustaining the peace process - through an MoU with his party, as the price of the SLMC joining the government. Basil, however, had balked at an MoU and said that the SLFP was only interested in getting to the number needed for a workable majority in parliament. In particular, he rejected the SLMC request for an amendment to the local election law, which the government had used in the last round to the disadvantage of the SLMC. Basil blustered that the SLFP would simply move in and take over the SLMC's turf. "Your leader will then be left behind on his own, if

he doesn't want to join us."

¶3. (C) Hakim said he found this "ugly and unpleasant." He found the tactics on the part of the ruling party "unprecedented" in Sri Lanka. He reported telling Basil that his group was willing to meet with the President to see what might come out of such an encounter - but would not agree in advance to join the government side. The SLMC would need to be able to explain to its base why it was allying itself with the ruling party and had to find "a more dignified way of joining the government." In particular, the SLMC could not facilitate a purely military approach to ending the ethnic conflict. However, he noted that some of the MPs from other parties who were anxious to cross over were clearly focused on obtaining ministerial posts and perks.

¶4. (C) Hakim said that the government was having trouble recruiting enough MPs from other parties to reach a majority. He had heard that Basil's timetable for getting to this result had slid by about a week, until January 29. Meanwhile, he said, "the good governance of the country is suffering every day." Hakim also reported that he met with SLFP MPs who had seen the President earlier in the day who reported that the President was now thinking about holding a snap election in March or April. (Note: this would be a serious disincentive to crossovers, who would have to contest the election just after switching parties.)

¶5. (C) Hakim shared our view that the MoU was the most promising avenue for developing a serious peace proposal. He said he hoped for a reconciliation between UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and the UNP dissidents, but thought that "most

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of these people had burned their boats." He also thought that about 15-20 MPs from the President's party loyal to former President Kumaratunga were highly dissatisfied with the Rajapaksas' leadership, and were preparing to turn the tables by deserting the President if a new election were called.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The tide may be turning against Basil Rajapaksa's strategy of wooing over opposition MPs. If most of the SLMC parliamentarians decline to cross over, and the numbers of the UNP deputies willing to join the government also declined, then the Rajapaksas will have a hard time finding the numbers they need to govern comfortably. Hakim may end up losing a couple of his members to the government side - in addition to the four who had defected previously - but he did not sound like someone who was ready to throw in the towel. If anything, Basil's rough treatment of the SLMC deputies seemed to have stiffened Hakim's resolve to stand on principle. Much will depend now on whether Ranil Wickremesinghe can rise to the occasion by making peace with his dissidents.

BLAKE